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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses why the theme approach to the teaching of literature to elementary school students is an effective way to focus attention on concepts related to pupils' lives. The author argues that this approach is better than organizing children's literature according to either subject or type because the teacher can more easily guide his students toward the goals of critical thinking. While various students may read different books (depending on their reading level and interests), the class as a whole can meaningfully share ideas focusing on one theme. The author asserts that teachers often become preoccupied with the problems of word recognition and literal comprehension and consequently fail to raise the level of comprehension or to encourage interpretation, evaluation, and application of ideas gained from reading. A theme approach to literature may serve to personalize the reading experience and to develop critical thinking. (Author/DI)

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THE THEME APPROACH FOR READING LITERATURE CRITICALLY

Session 16A - The Role of Literature

Introduction

In the Winter issue of the Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin, Frances Ross Hicks and Jean V. Marani expressed two widely separated ideas which might serve to introduce the importance of using a theme approach around which the literature program might be organized, thus providing teachers with opportunities to encourage critical reading-thinking skills.

The first of these ideas was expressed by Jean V. Marani (1). "Sweeping into every corner of America are the forces of change. Nothing is immune; no one can hide in the comforting folds of familiar ways. As Gabriel noted from his heavenly perch in

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(1) Marani, Jean V. "Seedbeds of Change," The Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin, XXXIV (Winter 1968), 29.

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Marc Connely's play, Green Pastures: 'Everything nailed down is coming loose.'"

From the same magazine comes the second idea by Frances Ross Hicks (2) when she defined the task of the educator "...to involve students in the business of thinking, of reasoning, of making ethical judgments, of using fore-thought, of discriminating between 'old sayings' and those traditions which represent the distilled wisdom of the ages, with the further task of helping students internalize these tested values and make them their own."

To place our topic in proper perspective we need to consider an additional idea, that of the problem of education as it is caught between its aim, as expressed by Dr. Hicks, and the era of change which Dr. Marani defined. Perhaps Margaret Mead (3) has done this best by saying: "We are now at the point where we must educate people in what nobody knew yesterday, and prepare in our schools for what no one knows yet, but what some people must know tomorrow."

We have, then, the element of change and the momentous task of developing critical thinkers for a world we know not of. With these three quotations serving as a backdrop for considering the literature program for the elementary children of America, what is a satisfactory organizational plan and what type of guidance in critical thinking is desirable?

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(2) Hicks, Frances Ross. "What Are We Doing to Improve Personal Values?" The Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin, XXXIV (Winter 1968), 11.

(3) Marani, Jean V. "Seedbeds of Change", The Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin, XXXIV (Winter 1968), 35.

Organizing the Literature Program

Basic to a sequential plan for literary experiences of elementary school children are books of excellence. Siddie Joe Johnson (4), in the initial article in the Literature Section of The Reading Teacher two years ago, wrote: "...all we have to do, is to remember the poet Walter de la Mare's words, as though they were graven on our hearts as well as on the Regina Medal of the Catholic Library Association, that 'only the rarest kind of best in anything can be good enough for the young.'"

A great deal of guidance is given to teachers and curriculum specialist in ways of finding books of excellence. Professional journals, like The Reading Teacher and Elementary English, regularly offer sections on literature. Many newspapers feature book reviews of children's books. Departments of education offer courses on Children's Literature and Adolescence Literature. (Jean Betzner used to say every teacher should have a refresher course in children's literature every five years!) The Horn Book is a magazine devoted exclusively to news and reviews of children's books. There is, therefore, help in abundance in making wise choices of children's books at all age levels.

In a recent study Paul Anderson polled 296 teachers in widely separated schools, which represented 24 states, asking

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(4) Johnson, Siddie Joe. "Excellence For a Beginning," The Reading Teacher, 20 (Nov. 1966), 179.

them to list the books read aloud to their classes. The following ten books were mentioned most frequently:

Title	Author	Publisher
Charlotte's Web	E. B. White	Harper
Call It Courage	Armstrong Sperry	Macmillan
The Hundred Dresses	Eleanor Estes	Harcourt, Brace
The "Little House" Books	Laura I. Wilder	Harper Brothers
Island of the Blue Dolphins	Scott O'Dell	Houghton
Twenty-One Balloons	William Du Bois	Viking
And Now Miguel	Joseph Krumgold	Crowell
Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle	Betty McDonald	Lippincott
The Shadow of a Bull	Wojciechowska	Atheneum
Brighty of the Grand Canyon	Margaret Henry	Rand

We know, of course, that in many schools children are hearing good books. It does not always follow, however, that curriculums are organized for or teachers give guidance in development and improvement of reading-thinking skills when the children themselves read.

Should the books from the children's literature field be organized? If so, how? Can books of literary value be organized in the total school curriculum? By types? By relation to subject matter? By themes? Is not the latter one of the most attractive ways? If we organize according to types, the basis of organization is more or less mechanical. If we organize according to subject matter, we may encourage only literal

Comprehension. If we organize according to theme, we provide the teacher with opportunities for guiding her pupils toward significant ideas and the evaluation of them.

What themes might be considered? One teacher chose to organize her curriculum around the following themes: Understanding Ourselves and Others, Accepting Challenge, The Therapy of Laughter and Beauty, and Security of Knowledge. Understanding of Self was considered from three points of view: "growing up," "being courageous," and "achieving." During the time that "achieving" was in focus, the teacher encouraged the reading of such books as Nobody Listens to Andrew, Let's be Enemies, Wait for William, Too Little Rosa, Little Pear, Island of the Blue Dolphins, and King of the Wind. One part of the "understanding others" theme dealt with "understanding people in different countries." When this themewas dominant, consideration was given to: What Time is it Jeanne Marie?, Grow Boy, Gilberto and the Wind, The Story about Ping, Madeline's Rescue, The Apple and the Arrow, Burma Boy, and Secret of the Andes.

In using the theme of children's books for organizational purposes, as in any other plan, books of many reading levels are needed in order for the teacher to meet reading needs of various members of the class. H. Alan Robinson (5) has said, "It is possible for students to learn something of the art of

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(5) Robinson, H. Alan. "Developing Lifetime Readers," Journal of Reading, 11 (April 1968), 549.

literature without requiring all of them to read the same book. Students have various needs at different stages of development and the literature program should be reflective of such needs."

In the lists enumerated above, the theme ties together the reading experiences of the pupils, while the reading levels offered by the various books, takes care of individual differences in reading achievement. Although one child may read What Time is it Jeanne Marie? another in the same class may read Secret of the Andes. Yet, in organizing by and focusing attention on a theme, all pupils in the class may share ideas, think critically about them, read orally to share or to prove a point (in real audience situations) one of the most desirable uses of oral reading, and discuss ways of applying ideas gained from their reading.

Stimulating Critical Thinking

Although you and I as teachers recognize the comprehensiveness of the reading process as one which includes recognition, comprehension, interpretation, evaluation, and application of ideas, we often become preoccupied with the problems of mere word recognition and literal comprehension. Failure in raising the level of comprehension, encouraging interpretation, and proceeding to the heart of the reading process, that is evaluating and applying ideas, is to begin the task of teaching pupils to read, but not to complete it.

While it is necessary to deal with detailed ways and means of improving instruction in the areas of word recognition and certain types of comprehension from the point of view of many types of learners, instruction which fosters interpreting ideas, evaluating them and applying them is the ultimate goal. Inherent in that goal is the basic aim of all instruction--that of developing character traits which stimulate desirable thinking and action for citizens in a changing society.

Virginia Reid has said, "Thical values develop through books when the reader identifies with another child faced with like situations and evaluates his solutions."

In discussing the topic, "Books That Reveal Ethical Values," Jean Bishop,(6) Children's Librarian of the Public Library at Richmond, mentions "Lloyd Alexander who has written a chronicle in three books, The Book of Three, The Black Cauldron (Holt, 1965), and The Castle of Llyr, which have romance, humor, adventure, magic spells. Mighty conflicts between forces of good and evil in these books force the reader to evaluate the causes of each cast of characters. He begins to love the good and hate the evil. He identifies with the side of good. As an adult citizen, part of his responsibility will be to evaluate issues and aligh himself on the side which seems nearest right."

During the last decade, critical reading has been the subject of numerous articles and speeches. William Durr in Reading

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(6) Bishop, Jean. "Books That Reveal Ethical Values," The Instructor, Nov. 1966.

Instruction: Dimensions and Issues (7) reprints an article from The Reading Teacher, May 1964, by Robert H. Ennis in which he delineates nine major aspects of critical thinking. In the same volume, Helen W. Painter writes, "Children of primary grades will be able to think critically about those situations which are a part of their own experiences or can be related to them." Later she adds, "Many children will not do critical reading or thinking unless the teacher directs or challenges them. Surely critical reading by children calls for teachers who are critical thinkers themselves." Leo Fay (8) has said, "Actually children at ages well before those at which they enter school are able to make valid judgments in relation to their experiences and their maturity levels." For the past several years Sara Lundsteen and Charlotte Huck have been involved in reading research studies determining critical ability and ways of improving critical thinking in elementary school pupils. Russell Stauffer, former editor of The Reading Teacher, frequently writes and speaks on the cognitive processes in relation to critical reading. The article by Helen Huus, "Critical and Creative Reading" in Reading and Inquiry is often quoted.

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(7) Durr, William. Reading Instruction: Dimensions and Issues, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967.

(8) Fay, Leo. Developing the Ability to Read Critically, Reading Promotion Bulletin. Chicago: Lyons and Carnahan.

A highly significant research study, covering a period of three years and involving some 600 students in the elementary grades, was completed at Ohio State University. The aim of the research was to test the thesis: Can elementary school children be trained to read and think critically? The answer was an unequivocal, "Yes."

Critical reading skills are defined differently by various reading experts. Nila B. Smith (9) likes to think of critical reading as including literal comprehension and interpretation. She defines interpretive skills as "...supplying or anticipating meanings not stated directly in the text, such as drawing inferences; making generalizations; reasoning cause and effect; speculating on what happened between events; anticipating what will happen next; detecting the significance of a statement, passage,or selection; making comparisons; identifying the purpose of the writer and the motives of the characters; associating perso nal experiences with reading content; forming sensory images; experiencing emotional reactions." However, Dr. Smith says critical reading goes further "...in that the reader evaluates, that is, passes judgment on the quality, the value, the accuracy, and the truthfulness of what is read."

The need, then is to gather together books of excellence,

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(9) Smith, Nila Banton. Reading Instruction for Today's Children, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1963.

cluster them about worthwhile themes, and so guide pupil-readers that they will develop into mature, critical thinkers. The guidance must go further. For pupils must be lead to apply the results of their evaluation of ideas to their own lives.

From a practical point of view, one way to encourage pupils to think critically about a theme, while reading from various books related to that theme, is for the teacher to follow a procedure such as the following: (1) First Step--Readiness Introduction: setting the stage for the theme, its universality, its meaning to readers (of this particular age group); (2) second Step--Browsing Period: in which the readers scan chapter headings, reads a little here and there, and "read" pictures, (a pre-reading activity); (3) Third Step--Pre-Discussion Period: Who do you suppose your book is about? Is it real or fanciful? Where do the characters live? When did they live? What do you think is going to happen in your book? Why do you think so? Have any of these things ever happened to you? How do you think your story ends? Why? (4) A Fourth Step--The Reading Period: guided by questions such as: Who are the people in the story? What happens first? What else happens? How do the characters feel? Act? Would you have felt that way? Or acted the same way? Could the characters have reacted differently? Should they? If so, why? (5) A Fifth Step--Post-Discussion Period: Were you right about what you thought was going to happen? Did your characters act the way you thought they would? Why did they

act that way? How did they feel? Have you ever felt that way? What idea from your story is worth remembering? Why? Can you think of a time you might use this idea or need to remember it? Do you feel differently about some people and some places as a result of reading your story? How? Why? Why do you think the author wrote the book? Did he succeed in his purpose? How did he tell you about the characters? What type of literature is it? Are the illustrations appropriate? Why? Do you know anything about the author? The illustrator?

By using questions, teachers can encourage critical thinking. For example, recently in demonstrating how to read a picture book to a young group of children, Charlotte Huck, using Where the Wild Things Are, asked these among other questions: Where were the wild things? What kind of story is it? Could it really happen? Why? What kind of boy was Max? What did Max do to the wild beast? Was Max Happy? Was he the same boy after his dream? What did you notice about the colors in the book? Why did the artist use these colors? Do you know any other make-believe stories?

Summary

The theme approach provides the teacher with an excellent means of organizing literature into units each of which serves to focus attention on concepts related to pupil's lives. Using themes as an organizational pattern also offers the teacher an opportunity for guiding critical thinking through questions and discussions. Thus, he is able to lead pupils not only in

interpretation, but also in evaluation and application of ideas gained from reading.

Boys and girls may internalize and personalize to the point where they actually become <u>different people</u>, as a result of having had contact with great themes in significant children's books and because of <u>exciting</u> reading experiences.